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## Movie Review:

### Texas Rangers

Review by Chuck Parsons



*Several years ago, the Hall of Fame and Museum staff learned that Dimension Films was planning a new Texas Ranger movie to be released in 1999. It was to showcase rising star Dylan McDermott of television's *The Practice*. The script writers had purchased the rights to the 1962 book *Taming the Nueces Strip* based on Texas Ranger George Durham's reminiscences of Capt. Leander McNelly and the Special Force.*

*As a matter of courtesy, the staff contacted Dimension Films to let them know that historical assistance was available. They informed us that the \$30 million production would be shooting in Calgary, Canada and forwarded a script for our archives.*

*From the start we sensed a certain lack of enthusiasm on Dimension Films' part for the project. The release date of the movie was vague and was pushed back several times in the following months. The star, Dylan McDermott, was reported to be none too happy with the production or his stay in Calgary.*

*As time passed, it became obvious that *Texas Rangers* was a movie the studio would rather forget. It was not previewed for critics prior to release (a bad sign) and its run at most theaters was a few days.*

*We asked Chuck Parsons, an authority on Capt. Leander McNelly, to see the movie and give us his opinion. Chuck co-authored *Captain L.H. McNelly -- Texas Ranger: The Life and Times of a Fighting Man* with Marianne Elizabeth Hall Little.*

Review: Texas Rangers

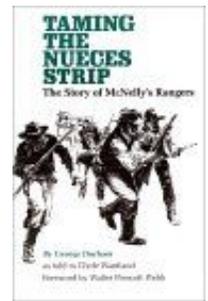


*Texas Rangers* purports to be the story of Captain Leander McNelly who commanded a force of Texas Rangers in South Texas during the mid 1870s.

Script writers John Milius and Ehren Kruger loosely based the screenplay on *Taming the Nueces Strip*, the



border reminiscences of 80 year old Ranger George Durham as told to newspaperman Clyde Wantland in the 1930s.



### The Real McNelly and the Nueces Strip

The "Strip" was a large area of ranch land on the south Texas border between the Nueces and the Rio Grande rivers. The sparsely populated area was home to millions of cattle that attracted rustlers and bandits.



### The Real Leander McNelly

Capt. Leander McNelly, Confederate veteran and Reconstruction lawman, was sent to the Nueces Strip by Governor Richard Coke in early 1875. Influential cattlemen like Richard King had petitioned for an end to raids from Mexico that threatened the herds of the giant King Ranch and smaller outfits. Emboldened by the lack of law enforcement, the raiders had attacked the small settlement of Nuecestown and even planned to attack Corpus Christi.

In response to the raids, Governor Coke authorized the organization of a Special Force of Rangers comprised of McNelly and thirty volunteers. Captain McNelly was given authority equivalent to martial law -- he was to use whatever force he deemed necessary to establish order. Bandits were to be pursued and killed with no quarter given and none expected. Considering the small number of Rangers (never more than 30), and the hundreds of rustlers and bandits in the area, it is surprising that McNelly and his men survived. McNelly was audacious, in part because he had little to lose -- he was dying of terminal tuberculosis.

Two exploits against Mexican raiders earned Capt. McNelly a place in Texas folklore. In June of 1875, he surprised and engaged a group of raiders on the Palo Alto Prairie battlefield. Sixteen Mexican raiders were killed, against the loss of one Texas Ranger, young Berry Smith.



Juan Cortina

In November of 1875, McNelly invaded Mexico to attack Las Cuevas, the stronghold of factional leader Juan Cortina. The Rangers recovered several hundred head of stolen cattle, and may have killed-- by gunfire or summary execution -- somewhere between two and three dozen raiders.

The Special Force became an anathema to criminals as well as a portion of the law-abiding population. After two years of service, McNelly died of tuberculosis at 33 and was buried in Burton, Texas, leaving behind a wife and two children. The State of Texas had dismissed McNelly from service earlier because of his mounting medical bills and the political fallout from his summary actions and violations of the Mexican border. In the end, Capt. McNelly did what he was sent to do, establish frontier justice in the Nueces Strip. He also earned a reputation for ferocity and swift retribution that increased with the passage of time.

## McNelly's Texas Rangers in the Movie

John Milius' and Ehren Kruger's script takes huge liberties with Durham's recollections as recorded by Wantland. McNelly was never a preacher, but the film identifies him as being one prior to his leaving Texas to fight in the Civil War. The McNelly of this short, 93 minute film (played by Dylan McDermott) suffers the murder of his family by bandits before becoming a Ranger. This fate conveniently provides him with a personal motive for revenge. (The real McNelly was survived by a wife and two children.)

To make the story line tighter (?), the film transforms historical figure John King Fisher (played by Alfred Molina) into the crime boss of the bandits and McNelly's arch nemesis. In real life, Juan Cortina, was the crime boss of the Rio Grande, at least to the Texas ranchers who lost their cattle to his raiders. But Cortina appears only briefly in a conference with King Fisher. Cortina's appearance in the film adds nothing to the storyline.

In the major episode of the film, McNelly (McDermott) and his Texas Rangers invade Mexico to attack John King Fisher's headquarters at Las Cuevas. The real McNelly did invade Mexico to attack Las Cuevas. However, it was the stronghold of border strongman Juan Flores Salinas (not John King Fisher), whom McNelly's men did kill.

At the end of the film both McNelly and Fisher die by each other's hands in a less than dramatic shoot-out. McNelly's proteges, George Durham and the fictional Lincoln R. Dunnison, are left to carry on the McNelly tradition of taking the fight to the raiders.

This film may be appealing to the crowd that likes to hear the firing of thousands of blanks accompanied by legions of stuntmen jumping, falling and writhing on the ground in mock agony. There is also a token romantic interest provided by the nascent longings of two young Rangers, Durham and Dunnison, for a Miss Dukes -- in real life the daughter of Cattleman Richard King. The tone of the movie is dark with much of the action occurring at dawn or dusk. There is very little colorful language and sex takes a holiday, as in the matinee westerns of old.



The true story of McNelly's Rangers is best found elsewhere. This film reduces it to visceral entertainment -- gun fights, hangings and galloping horses. It is what western film enthusiasts refer to as an "oater" -- a \$30 million version of a 1950s cowboy matinee movie. In the end, it is unlikely to do much for the career of Dylan McDermott.

Leander McNelly -- played by Dylan McDermott  
 Lincoln R. Dunnison -- James Van Der Beek  
 George Durham - Ashton Kruger

Texas Ranger

# DISPATCH



**Caroline Dukes -- Rachael Leigh Cook  
John King Fisher -- Alfred Molina  
Directed by Steve Miner,  
Produced by Alan Greisman and Frank Price**



**Chuck Parsons is currently completing a biography of Texas Ranger N.O. Reynolds. He is the co-author of Captain L.H. McNelly -- Texas Ranger the definitive work on the McNelly's Special Force.**

**His previous books include biographies of Clay Allison (1977, 1984), The Capture of John Wesley Hardin (1978), Phil Coe: Texas Gambler (1984), Bowen & Hardin (1991), James Madison Brown: Texas Sheriff, Texas Turfman (1993), Captain C.B. McKinney: The Law in South Texas (with Gary P. Fitterer, 1993), as well as several hundred periodical articles and book reviews.**

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